

Thunder God Vine

This fact sheet provides basic information about the herb thunder god vine—common names, uses, potential side effects, and resources for more information. Thunder god vine has been used in China for health purposes for more than 400 years.

Common Names—thunder god vine, lei gong teng

Latin Name—*Tripterygium wilfordii*

What It Is Used For

- Thunder god vine has been used in traditional Chinese medicine for conditions involving inflammation or overactivity of the immune system.
- Orally, thunder god vine is taken for excessive menstrual periods or autoimmune diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and lupus.
- Thunder god vine preparations are also applied to the skin for rheumatoid arthritis.

How It Is Used

Extracts are prepared from the skinned root of thunder god vine.

What the Science Says

- Laboratory findings suggest that thunder god vine may fight inflammation, suppress the immune system, and have anti-cancer effects.
- Although early evidence is promising, there have been few high-quality studies of thunder god vine in people. Results from a small study funded by the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS) suggest that an oral extract of the herb may improve rheumatoid arthritis symptoms in some patients. A larger NIAMS-funded study is comparing thunder god vine with a conventional medicine for rheumatoid arthritis.
- A small study on thunder god vine applied to the skin also found benefits for rheumatoid arthritis symptoms.
- There is not enough scientific evidence to assess thunder god vine's use for any other health conditions.

Side Effects and Cautions

- Thunder god vine can cause severe side effects and can be poisonous if it is not carefully extracted from the skinned root. Other parts of the plant—including the leaves, flowers, and skin of the root—are highly poisonous and can cause death.

- The extract of thunder god vine used in the NIAMS study was well tolerated. However, thunder god vine can cause diarrhea, upset stomach, hair loss, headache, menstrual changes, and skin rash.
- Thunder god vine has been found to decrease bone mineral density in women who take the herb for 5 years or longer. This side effect may be of particular concern to women who have osteoporosis or are at risk for the condition.
- Thunder god vine decreases sperm count and so may be associated with male infertility.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

Sources

Canter PH, Hyang SL, Ernst E. A systematic review of randomized clinical trials of *Tripterygium wilfordii* for rheumatoid arthritis. *Phytotherapy*. 2006;13(5):371-377.

Tao X, Younger J, Fan FZ, et al. Benefit of an extract of *Tripterygium wilfordii* Hook F in patients with rheumatoid arthritis: a double-blind, placebo-controlled study. *Arthritis & Rheumatism*. 2002;46(7):1735-1743.

Setty AR, Sigal LH. Herbal medications commonly used in the practice of rheumatology: mechanisms of action, efficacy, and side effects. *Seminars in Arthritis and Rheumatism*. 2005;34(6):773-784.

Carter BZ, Mark DH, Schober WD, et al. Triptolide induces caspase-dependent cell death mediated via the mitochondrial pathway in leukemic cells. *Blood*. 2006;108(2):630-637.

Thunder god vine. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database Web site. Accessed at <http://www.naturaldatabase.com> on June 12, 2007.

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. *Rheumatoid Arthritis and Complementary and Alternative Medicine*. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine Web site. Accessed at <http://www.nccam.nih.gov/health/RA> on June 13, 2007.

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. *Chinese Thunder God Vine Gives Relief from Rheumatoid Arthritis Symptoms*. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases Web site. Accessed at <http://www.niams.nih.gov/ne/highlights/spotlight/2002/thunder.htm> on June 13, 2007.

For More Information

Visit the NCCAM Web site at nccam.nih.gov and view:

- *What's in the Bottle? An Introduction to Dietary Supplements* at nccam.nih.gov/health/bottle/
- *Herbal Supplements: Consider Safety, Too* at nccam.nih.gov/health/supplement-safety/

NCCAM Clearinghouse

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

E-mail: info@nccam.nih.gov

CAM on PubMed

Web site: nccam.nih.gov/camonpubmed/

NIH Office of Dietary Supplements

Web site: www.ods.od.nih.gov

This publication is not copyrighted and is in the public domain. Duplication is encouraged.

NCCAM has provided this material for your information. It is not intended to substitute for the medical expertise and advice of your primary health care provider. We encourage you to discuss any decisions about treatment or care with your health care provider. The mention of any product, service, or therapy is not an endorsement by NCCAM.

National Institutes of Health



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services